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Chapter 1 from *Beyond Anger Management: Master Your Anger as a Strategic Tool*

1. What is Anger?

Anger is an emotion, a primitive threat detector, and a motivator.

Anger is one of the five primary emotions that exist in humans and many subhuman species. These five emotions are *mad* (anger), *sad*, *glad* (happy), *fear*, and *disgust*. With the exception of glad, the job of each of these feelings is to alert you to and physically prepare your body to deal with a different type of threat.

In other words, in its simplest form, anger is a primitive threat detector and motivator.

Humans do not have sharp teeth or claws to protect us. We have our senses (sight, hearing, smell) which scan our surroundings and which trigger our emotions. Our emotions have helped us survive as a species by both alerting us to and preparing us to deal with threats to our survival.

You may have several “threat detectors” in your home.

In my home, I have a smoke detector, a heat detector, and a carbon monoxide detector. All of these “detectors” are designed to keep my family and me safe and insure our survival by alerting us to a threat, giving us time to respond to the threat, and motivating us to take whatever action is necessary. Each detector is focused on a specific threat and when it perceives that threat, it sounds an alarm. This is the “message” of that alarm. The detector does not evaluate the threat. It only reacts. Once alerted, I have a choice about how I want to respond to the alarm. In the case of the smoke detector, I can call the fire department if there is a genuine threat or I can remove the burnt toast and open the windows if it is a false alarm.

It is the same way with our emotions. When we experience an emotion, it tells us that we perceive the *possible* presence of a threat. This is the message of the emotion. How we respond to this message is our choice.

While I have discussed the primary feelings in depth in my earlier book *Emotions as Tools A Self Help Guide to Controlling Your Life not Your Feelings*, I will list these feelings and the threat that each feeling detects so that you know how anger fits in.

The message of *sadness* is that we have lost something or someone important to us. The threat is to our long term well-being. Sadness motivates us to take some time, back away from life, and mourn the loss. Then, we can get on with our lives.

The message of *fear* is that we are facing a threat that will kill us. Fear motivates and prepares us to escape. Fear is a present based (here and now) feeling. It is the hair on the back of the neck rising up. The message to us is to get out of the situation regardless of how harmless it may appear to be. Fear, by the way, is not the same as anxiety, which is a future based emotion. Equating them is a very common mistake.

The message of *disgust* is that we are facing a threat that is not healthy for us. Disgust motivates us to avoid the threat. We avoid eating food we find disgusting. We avoid situations we find disgusting. And so forth.

The message of *glad* (not a threat detector) is that we are facing a situation which is engaging and enjoyable. Glad motivates and energizes us to stay involved with the situation or task.

The message of *anger* is that we perceive a threat that we believe we can overpower if we throw enough force at it. Anger motivates and prepares us to fight.

Anger is a powerful emotion.

Anger helped us survive as a species.

When we were cave people, we faced threats every day that would kill us. Survival was our primary goal. We, literally, needed to be prepared to fight for our lives. The emotion of anger prepared us to engage the enemy, eliminate the threat, and live to fight another day.

When you get angry, it means you believe you have the ability to engage the threat and overpower it. If you believed the threat would overpower you, you would feel fear.

Anger is an energizing emotion. Our bodies produce adrenalin which gives us extra strength. Our eyes and ears focus on the threat. Anger prepares us for battle. We feel powerful and we are powerful!

For most of our existence as a species, anger worked well because *all* of the threats were potentially lethal. These were survival based threats. There was no ambiguity. If it looked like a threat, it was a threat. The saber-toothed tiger looking down on our ancestors from a rock wanted to eat them for lunch. If they let marauders steal their food, they might die of starvation. Our ancestors needed all the power their bodies could muster and all the energy their anger provided.

This is the benefit, of anger. It notifies us and prepares us to engage a *genuine threat*.

For us, a survival based threat might include a threat to our lives, our family, our personal identities, or our core values.

In these situations, anger is very appropriate.

For you and me, however, relatively few of the threats that confront us are survival based. Indeed, it is far more likely that the “threat” we encounter in our lives is a traffic jam, a blocked goal, or some other source of frustration. These are *psychological threats*.

With psychological threats, our survival is not an issue. Rather, our egos or some immediate goal might be at risk and we feel vulnerable and, therefore, threatened.

The challenge with psychological threats is that they can be ambiguous and lead to misinterpretations. While we may initially perceive a threat, there may not actually be a threat. The comment of a co-worker may seem like a confrontation and a threat until you understand that his intent was to give you constructive feedback and he wasn’t clear about the best way to convey it.

Unfortunately, our anger does not make a distinction between psychological and survival based threats. A threat is perceived, anger kicks in, and you are prepared for battle.

The downside of anger is that you may go to battle when no real threat exists.

In a similar way, your smoke detector reacts to all smoke as if there is an emergency. It does not distinguish between a house fire and burnt toast. You have the responsibility of analyzing the threat and choosing an appropriate response.

It is the same with anger.

I will discuss the nature of threats in Chapter 3.

Anger is a Tool: The Emotions as Tools Model

I developed the Emotions as Tools Model as a therapy and training aide. The young incarcerated women I worked with needed a way to be able to understand and strategically use their own feelings to both progress clinically and to become more effective in their dealings with others. The correctional staff, who were skeptical of anything as “touchy-feely” as emotions, also needed a way to understand both their own feelings and the feelings of others.

The Emotions as Tools Model says that each feeling is a tool which, like any tool such as your universal DVR/TV remote, a new smart phone, your new computer, or a table saw, has a specific function. The specific function of each emotion, as a tool, must be clearly understood if we are to respond appropriately.

Viewing emotions as tools takes the mystery out of feelings. There is nothing “touchy-feely” about your new cell phone. However “sexy” or “cool” your new phone may be to you, it is just a tool to be understood in order to be mastered.

Your anger, as a tool, performs several tasks for you.

First, your anger provides information about the perceived threat.

Secondly, your anger gives you information about what you see as your ability to confront the threat. This information includes your quick assessment about your own strengths and weaknesses relative to the threat. When you get angry, you believe that you are more powerful than the threat. You also believe that you can defeat the threat.

Thirdly, your anger prepares your body to confront the threat. You feel both motivated to engage the threat and powerful enough to overcome it.

Fourthly, you can strategically use your knowledge of anger as a tool in your relationships with others. Specifically, if you are angry at another person, you can evaluate your perception of the threat. If someone is directing anger at you, you can safely assume that they see you as a threat. You can then use this information to adjust how you respond to them.

I will discuss dealing with someone else’s anger in Chapter 9.

Just as you can learn to master other frustrating tools, you can learn to master anger as a tool. While you may experience your anger as controlling you or beyond your capacity to understand, you can learn to master it with help.

Mastering your anger as a tool involves using the information your anger provides and focusing the motivation and energy your anger generates to take adaptive action to improve your life and your relationships.

There are several ways to master a tool.

One is to pick it up, play with it, and learn to use it by trial and error. Reading a manual... “Why bother?”

The problem is that, while the trial and error approach may work to acquire knowledge, it can be tedious.

And it can backfire if you develop bad habits.

I have a friend who taught himself how to play golf. You can think of golf clubs as tools. He thought he was pretty good. And, he was, relatively speaking. He found, however, that he reached a point where he could not improve his score no matter what he did. He developed bad “golf habits” and they began to work against him.

This is the downside of the trial and error approach. You may not learn the right material and you may become real good at the wrong behavior.

The second way to master a tool is to seek help from someone who already has mastered the tool and can show you how. This is both more effective and more efficient than trial and error.

My friend went to a professional and took some lessons.

The golf pro told him that if he wanted to improve his game, my friend would have to unlearn his bad habits and relearn the right way to play golf. He did as instructed and his game noticeably improved.

There are two lessons here.

The first lesson is that practice does not make perfect. *Practice makes permanent! Perfect practice makes perfect.* Now, I am not suggesting that any of us can achieve perfection. If this is your goal, you might want to reconsider. What I am saying is that whatever you are doing with your anger, you will keep doing it and develop permanent anger habits unless you learn some new skills. This is why people find it so hard to change the way they express their anger.

The second lesson is that while it may be difficult to change old habits, it is doable.

A Quick Note on Habits

Now that you know that your reaction to anger can be a habit, let me give you a quick overview on habits as most people do not understand what habits are....

- We all have them.
- They function automatically.
- They help us conserve energy.
- They enable us to multitask.
- They are just electrochemical pathways (neural networks) in our brains.
- We don't really think about them much.

Here is an illustration of how habits work.

Have you ever taken a shower, completed your hair-care routine, and, when you were done, could not remember if you put on hair conditioner? It is as if you weren't there when your brain led you to grab the conditioner.

Well, while you were there physically, psychologically you may have been somewhere else. Perhaps, you were thinking about work or an upcoming date, or having to finally confront someone you have been avoiding.

Your hair-care routine has become a habit and you go through the various steps without much conscious thought. You can mentally multitask because your routine has become automatic.

This is what habits are supposed to do. We engage in a series of actions, our brain learns and develops a neural network which encodes this set of actions, and we can replay the set anytime we need it. Once you set the neural network in motion, it functions automatically. Automating behaviors frees up energy for multitasking.

This is the psychological advantage of habits.

Habits are easy to form but challenging to change.

As long as a habit is adaptive and works for you, great, you should keep it. The problem is that you can encode a series of behaviors, like playing golf or getting angry, which no longer work to your advantage.

The automatic cruise control in your car can be seen as the physical equivalent of a habit. The cruise control enables you to set the speed at which you want to travel. Once set, the car automatically maintains the chosen speed.

As long as there are no hazards or other cars, there is no problem. When you encounter traffic, you turn off the automatic cruise control and "manually" monitor and control your speed. If you do not disable the cruise control, you could end up "cruising" into the car in front of you that is sitting in traffic. The automatic cruise control is doing its job but the conditions have changed so the job it is doing is no longer adaptive (working for you).

It is the same with habits. When the habit is no longer adaptive, you need to take it off automatic and revert to manual control.

It is important to note that you do not eliminate a habit. In order to change habitual behavior, you need to develop a new habit (neural network) which replaces the old one.

You may have heard that it takes 21 days to develop a new habit. When you continue to engage in new behaviors, it takes that long for the new neural networks to develop in your brain.

Anger as a Habit

If your anger is problematic for you, then you have developed a maladaptive anger habit. Your

maladaptive set of anger behaviors probably involves you perceiving a threat, getting angry, taking action to eliminate the threat, and getting in trouble. At some point, you may think about what you did and wish you had chosen to do something else.

When you *react* to situations with anger, you are on “automatic pilot”. Your reaction is overlearned, automatic, and habitual. If anger were a gun, your process would be: “Ready, Fire, Aim”. Mastering your anger would involve: “Ready, Aim, Fire (if necessary)”.

As with the cruise control, you need to disengage the automatic process so that you can *respond* to what is happening in the moment. You need to regain conscious contact with your anger. In other words, you need to become aware of, or mindful of, your anger and your situation. This is the equivalent of stepping on the brake to disengage the cruise control.

To the extent that you react to your anger habitually, you cannot apply your anger strategically.

You will explore your own anger habits in Chapter 4 when you complete the Anger Profile Checklist.

In the next chapter, I will introduce you to the Anger Mastery Cycle.

Putting It All Together

This chapter has been about anger. My goal was to introduce you to emotions in general and to anger specifically.

I introduced you to the five primary emotions of mad, sad, glad, fear and disgust and noted that all of the primary emotions, with the exception of glad, are primitive threat detectors which alert you to and prepare you to deal with the presence of danger.

We looked specifically at anger as a primary emotion and as a primitive threat detector and explored how anger helped us survive as a species.

A potential problem with anger as a primitive threat detector is that it prepares you for battle. This is great if your life is at risk as is the case with survival based threats. If, however, you are facing a psychological threat such as a traffic jam on the freeway, you are still ready to take on the enemy and there is no enemy.

I gave the example of a smoke detector that registers all smoke. If you call the fire department when your toaster burns your breakfast, you are overreacting. There is a mismatch between the level of threat detected by the smoke alarm and the actual situation in which no real threat exists. The same “mismatch” can happen with anger and the perception of threat.

I introduced the Emotions as Tools Model as a metaphor to demystify emotions. The words “emotion” and “feeling” are interchangeable. The Model makes feelings accessible to and understandable by anyone regardless of their skepticism or tendency to avoid anything that is “touchy-feely”.

I also discussed four tasks that your anger, as a tool, performs for you.

Finally, I discussed the topic of habits and how habits enable you to automate behaviors so you can conserve energy and multitask. One example includes washing your hair. If you have a habitual response to anger, then your habit can work against you in that it will lead you to take action that is inappropriate.

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